

DOCUMENT RESUME**ED 284 953****UD 025 785**

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TITLE Issues in Designing Magnet Schools.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED),
Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 17p.; In: Planning and Developing Magnet Schools:
Experience and Observation; see UD 025 778.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; *Magnet Schools;
Program Design; Program Evaluation; *Program
Implementation; School Administration; *School
Desegregation; Student Recruitment; Teacher
Attitudes; *Urban Schools; *Voluntary
Desegregation

ABSTRACT

This paper, based loosely on findings presented in the other papers collected with it in a single volume, discusses general issues in designing magnet schools, focusing on three main themes: (1) the interdependence of program design and recruitment issues; (2) school level practices which help to turn racial desegregation into racial integration; and (3) the strains experienced by teachers and principals when programs are imposed from above. Magnet schools must be designed to be attractive to volunteering parents. This task is complicated by the requirement of appealing to a constituency that is both narrow (those interested in a specialized education) and diverse (racially and ethnically). Moreover, magnet schools are obliged not to make regular schools appear to be second class, or to leave the staffs at regular schools feeling that their best students are being pulled away from them. To avoid this seeming conflict of goals, it may be best to think of a magnet school as an array of schools rather than as a single school. Magnet schools must appeal to all types of students, not just to those who are best at competing in traditional instructional environments. Because most magnet schools are desegregated schools, it is important that teachers pay attention to students' social and cultural diversity. Magnets allow students of different races to be put in situations where they must cooperate to achieve common goals. Magnet school teachers and principals, who are often expected to work in magnet programs that are quickly designed and imposed on a school, deserve much support and latitude. (KH)

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ED284953

ISSUES IN DESIGNING MAGNET SCHOOLS

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D02.5785

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INTRODUCTION

The author prepared this paper as a reactor to the major papers of this volume for the Conference for Project Directors of the Magnet School Assistance Program. The paper was intended to supplement the six major papers. It picks up three themes important for magnet school planners to consider which are treated only relatively briefly in the other papers. The themes are close to the actual operation of the schools; these reactions were intended to provide central office project directors a view of the issues from the school level upward. The three themes deal with the interdependence of program design and recruitment issues, with school level practices which help to turn racial desegregation into racial integration, and with the strains experienced by teachers and principals when programs are imposed from above.

DESIGNING MAGNET SCHOOLS TO DRAW AN OPTIMAL POPULATION

At least four of the authors speak to the need to design magnet schools in such a way that they will be attractive to volunteering parents. Several recognize the complexity of the task as a consequence of the fact that magnet schools should not draw their clientele through overall superiority, thus consigning traditional schools to second class status, but rather through appeal to a constituency interested in a specialized kind of education. Thus they must be designed to attract a rather narrow constituency out of the city's population, but

at the same time one which is diverse at least in race. If they are to meet the spirit of the impulse to desegregation, as Hale and Maynard point out, they should also appeal to a constituency which is diverse in class. Perhaps better said, they should not appeal just to the middle class, which is most likely to be easily drawn to volunteer, but should serve the poorest minority children who have historically received the least educational attention. A major thrust of legal actions for desegregation has been a desire to pull these children into the educational mainstream.

The challenge of diversity must be met at both the individual school and the system level. Each magnet school must offer a single distinctive departure from educational practice which will nonetheless appeal to socially diverse kinds of parents. In the array of magnet schools in a school system as a whole, planners must be sure to include programs which will serve the needs of children from prosperous, well-educated, politically articulate and powerful families, whom the central cities need to hold within their boundaries, and whose support can give magnet schools public acceptability. In the same array, and where possible in the same schools, some programs must be appropriate for and appealing to the poorest, least educated, and marginalized minority families whose children most need the assistance of the schools to gain access to mainstream economic and political life. At the same time, the magnet schools must also serve the needs of the majority of ordinary black, Hispanic, Oriental, Native American, and white children whose parents are the solid citizens of the community and the mainstay of both its white-collar and blue-collar labor force. There is real challenge in the task of designing an array of magnet schools which will appeal to these constituencies as volunteers. The task is made twice as difficult by the need not to make other

schools appear to be second class, or to leave their staffs feeling that their most alert and ambitious students are being pulled away from them to magnet schools.

The imperatives of these various goals may conflict. For example, Faye Bryant suggests that where schools are in minority neighborhoods perceived by whites as depressed, it is important to have programs that are perceived as academically selective in order to make them attractive to white parents. There is reason for this suggestion; some cities have located their schools designed to be attractive to the city's academically elite students in just such neighborhoods and have found they drew far more volunteers than could be accommodated. But while this policy is effective in attracting whites (and middle class minorities) into depressed minority neighborhoods, it tends to do so at the cost of a burden on the children of that neighborhood, most of whom will not qualify for the new magnet school. There is an irony in a successful magnet school's launching at the cost of displacing from a desegregated building minority children who most need educational assistance. Planners must make a series of difficult decisions which balance a concern for the welfare of all students with political realities concerning actions needed in order to draw both majority and minority students to magnet schools.

Some of these problems can be alleviated by thinking about the magnet schools as an array of schools, rather than as single schools. If it is possible to have other magnet schools which will in fact serve the children displaced in the previous example, and serve them well, then the choices become less painful. Thinking of the magnet schools as a total array also makes it easier to design magnet schools collectively to draw from all segments of the community, even though each alone may not do so. Thus, for example, elementary programs such as

a gifted and talented school, a school with an ecological emphasis, or an arts school are likely to appeal to middle class or ambitious working class parents, whatever their ethnicity, and they are likely to be best suited to children who learn the basics easily and have time for enrichment. That they do so becomes much less problematic both politically and morally if there are other schools such as a fundamental school, a continuous progress school, and a school following Individually Guided Education which are more likely to be appealing to working class families and to children for whom the basic work of elementary school is a significant challenge. Still, it is important that each school appeal to all races and that each be at least somewhat diverse in class composition, rather than reproducing the class isolation typical of neighborhood schools in large communities.

This task may be easiest to accomplish at the elementary level. Parents' ideas about good elementary education are more diverse and less tightly tied to their own class status than are their ideas about high school education. At the high school level the hand of tradition lies more heavily, and the academic pressures of college entrance constrain the teaching of students with college ambitions, even when they are not top achievers. An elementary school with almost any specialty which gains a reputation as a warm and caring place where children can learn without corrosive competitive pressures may draw from all walks of life as well as all races. Even at the middle school level parents from all walks of life may still seek out or be persuaded to investigate an innovative or a supportive and noncompetitive middle school to build the child's confidence and skills before the rigors of high school. This will be particularly true for parents whose children do not flourish in traditional school because they do not do well

with competition or are less than stellar performers, but it may also apply where children are capable but nontraditional thinkers.

At the elementary and middle school levels, especially, there are, then, opportunities to establish magnet schools which break with traditional lockstep, competitive instructional patterns. Furthermore, such schools can deal more easily than traditional schools with the academic diversity among students which is likely to accompany their social diversity. Such schools can meet the needs of many children who are not well matched to the social and academic patterns of traditional settings. They also provide contexts where practitioners and researchers can learn about the potentialities and limitations of alternative teaching styles or curriculum for various kinds of children. They can introduce ideas which can be more widely disseminated into traditional schools, if they are shown to be broadly helpful.

Because the educational discourse of our time emphasizes excellence and constant competitive ranking of students, magnet schools are all too often designed for ambitious, highly achieving students looking for excellence and competition. It is more difficult to develop an appealing rhetoric for schools which are designed to help solid but unspectacular achievers and below average achievers, but these students may need special innovative schools as much or more than do high achievers. Together such students constitute the numerical majority of both the white and black student population not only in cities, where magnet schools are most common, but also in more elite communities. Such students need schools which will help them learn up to their capacities and flourish as persons while they do so. Below average achievers, especially, need schools designed to help them with the substantial academic learning of which they are capable when not driven

by discouragement to withdraw their efforts. The emphasis needs to be on what each student can and does learn, rather than on ranking students' accomplishments. Magnet school planners and school level practitioners who thoughtfully design programs to help these children, while enveloping the programs in socially acceptable rhetoric, are likely to find grateful parents and students who will gladly enroll.

Metz's (1986) study of the life of three magnet middle schools, two of which had non-traditional educational approaches and drew student bodies which included a preponderance of average or below average achievers, explores both the political and recruitment issues which shaped these and all magnet schools in their urban district and the ways in which teachers and students in the three individual schools created distinctive patterns of daily school life. The book emphasizes the intertwining of political and recruitment processes with the development of a distinctive program and distinctive atmosphere inside each school. Central office planners concerned to design a successful magnet program must become knowledgeable about the many interdependent influences which shape both the ability of magnet schools to become and remain attractive and their ability actually to be constructive environments for students and their teachers.

ESTABLISHING RACIAL INTEGRATION AS A PURPOSE OF MAGNET PROGRAMS

It is important to remember that magnet schools are desegregated schools, a purpose the papers stress as they discuss recruitment of different races, but pay less attention to in considering program content.

Teachers must pay attention to students' social diversity. Students' academic success or lack of success in the crucial early grades, especially, is often affected

by teachers' ability to set them tasks and ask them questions in ways which provide some continuity with their home experience. Teachers can improve students' cognitive learning as well as their social relationships by developing knowledge about, and sensitivity to, diverse cognitive styles which students bring with them from home. Shirley Heath analyzes (1982, 1983) differences in cognitive styles among students in desegregated schools in one southern community. These styles, based on patterns of belief and family interaction that differed with class and race, created miscommunications between teachers and some students and led those students to be uncomfortable with tasks expected of them in school. Heath describes ways in which teachers can develop strategies of instruction which use varied cognitive styles during the school day. Discussion of such differences—for example in the style and meaning of questions or of storytelling—teaches all children to operate in several different cultural styles and to become reflective about linguistic modes of expression and interaction. Such discussion and the use of diverse modes of expression and thought becomes an enriching experience for all children in the class.

In her excellent study of interracial relations in a magnet middle school, Janet Schofield (1982) tells us that the topic of race became taboo in the school. Despite the visible reality of racial diversity, which most of the eleven to thirteen year old students were experiencing for the first time in their lives, adults set a pattern of ignoring race to the point where it was not mentionable. Students feared disapproval if they mentioned race even for such innocent purposes as describing to a teacher a student who had left one of his or her belongings in a classroom. In this atmosphere, it was impossible for students of both races to pursue their natural curiosity about one another in open ways or to discuss patterns

of behavior associated with race which sometimes puzzled, annoyed, or intimidated students of a different race. The taboo at this school reflects a general uneasiness in our society about openly discussing issues of race.

These issues do not go away because we do not acknowledge them. Children now being born will live in a society which is one third "minority" and two thirds "majority". Both majority and minority students need to learn to interact comfortably and without misunderstanding with members of the other groups in society. As Schofield's book shows, when teachers leave the development of such understandings to an unplanned "natural progression" after simply putting children together in the same space, most students make little progress toward such understanding.

Schofield draws upon lessons from social psychology and her ethnographic study of this magnet middle school to develop some principles which can guide teachers' and administrators' efforts to facilitate interracial relations. Following principles set out by Gordon Allport (1954), Schofield stresses, first, that steps need to be taken to encourage the development of equal social status for children of all races. Such equal status is often supported by the development of diverse activities in both the classroom and the school. With many different kinds of activities, many different individuals from all races have a chance to demonstrate skill and talent in some activity in front of their peers. The peer group is then less likely to develop a rigid prestige hierarchy based around a narrow range of skills.

Second, students of different races should be put in situations where they must cooperate for common goals. Situations which pit students of different races against one another in competition should be avoided. Cooperative projects in the

classroom are helpful. Intramural sports leagues even in elementary school, arts activities such as skits and musical groups, and student government can all be opportunities for cooperative interracial experiences. The adults in the school must see to it that such groups are consistently multiracial in membership.

Third, Schofield stresses that adults must take leadership in modeling and encouraging patterns of routine and constant interracial association. The importance of such association must be agreed upon and made a visible part of the school's agenda. Such an attitude can not be taken for granted merely because a setting is desegregated, even voluntarily desegregated, as Schofield's study shows. Both in selecting staff and in training for each school's program, central office planners must make the development of ways to encourage the move from desegregation to integrated social relationships among both adults and students part of the agenda for the school staffs.

Several other ethnographic studies, mostly by authors unaware of the social psychological theory upon which Schofield draws, have named processes similar to the ones she identifies as important in attempting to explain the development of friendly or tense interracial relations in schools. (See Metz, 1986 for a discussion of this work.) A good deal of experimental work in social psychology has also confirmed these patterns (Cohen, 1980, Slavin, 1980).

Policies that encourage good interracial relations need not take much time away from academic agendas. They include such simple matters as assigning seats in classrooms, so that students of different races sit next to one another and so have opportunities for observation of one another at close range and for casual, unplanned conversation. Many of the supplementary activities such as sports, arts activities, and student government which provide chances for equal status contact

and for interracial cooperation can constitute enrichment of the kind frequently offered by magnet schools in order to make schools appealing to volunteers. It is important, however, that adults monitor and guide events to be sure that students of different races have a chance to shine and to be sure that cooperating groups are constituted of interracial collections of students. Students, especially younger ones, will quickly pick up adults' expectations for uniracial or multiracial groupings in these contexts.

In order for these patterns to persist, the staff of each school must deal openly with the existence of racial diversity. Staff members of different races must themselves develop comfortable patterns of relationship, as well as the ability to break the societal expectation of silence around racial issues. These patterns will not develop without some assistance during the training period for the magnet school staff. Continuing inservice should also address them. The principal or some other staff person in the building should have both formal responsibility for, and good skills in, facilitating easy interracial communication on a continuing basis. Secondary school students who have not grown up in desegregated schools may need special help from facilitators in openly addressing tensions or simple questions about the other group.

SELECTING STAFF AND DEVELOPING COMMITMENT TO MAGNET PROGRAMS

This topic expands on Grace Fairlie's very useful discussion of ways to develop wide involvement in the school planning process, to create cadres of cheerleaders committed to the school, and to train staff to understand and to be faithful to the magnet plan. She takes the perspective of central office planners, that of the intended audience for these papers. I think there is value for this audience in

adding some observations on how these matters look from the bottom up, as school staffs struggle with the daily implementation of magnet school plans.

It is important for central office personnel to remember that the imposition of a magnet plan from above radically alters traditional relationships between building administrators and teachers. Despite the existence of traditional curriculum guides and of supervision by principals, in practice teachers usually have considerable freedom to choose their own curricular emphases and pedagogical approaches. Magnet schools sometimes dramatically alter that freedom as a particular pedagogical approach becomes the substance of a magnet program. The same pressures can occur when a substantive emphasis is expected to pervade the whole life of a school, so that math teachers must think about the artistic applications of arithmetic, or music teachers must ponder the ecological significance of sound. It is clearly best for the school if teachers volunteer for magnet programs and if they and the principal can be identified early enough so that all are involved in planning, and so in owning the school's design.

Where that is not possible, for example where union rules require staffing magnet schools with all teachers in a building who wish to stay, teachers will inevitably have a part in forming the actual practice of the magnet program whether their alterations are formally sanctioned or not. It is thus wise to acknowledge the teachers' part in forming the program and to find some organizational vehicle to allow them to discuss and alter the program legitimately rather than illegitimately. It is also helpful to find channels of transfer which will not penalize teachers who find themselves unsympathetic to the magnet program; if possible transfers which are actively congenial should be facilitated. Too often fear of transfer to a totally unknown school or loss of seniority rights through

transfer keep teachers who are unsympathetic with a magnet program in a school to become centers of discontent and of resistance to the realization of a distinctive educational approach.

Furthermore, where the magnet program is quickly designed and imposed on a school, then interpreted and required by the principal, the principal's unusually strong curricular and pedagogical demands are bound to be resented by teachers. Conflict is likely to ensue. While this conflict may not be easily visible to outsiders, it will affect the shape of the education offered and the daily experiences of students. Both principal and teachers deserve support in such a situation. Principals may need some one who is not in authority over them as a sympathetic counselor. They also need to be given latitude to recognize teachers' reasonable requests for resources and their suggestions for alteration of the program in accord with their experiences with the realities of the situation within the schools' walls.

CONCLUSION

It is important for central office planners to remember that the most careful of blueprints for magnet school plans and for individual magnet schools can be only that. Parents and students come to the process of choice of magnet schools as whole persons, not simply as consumers of rationally designed educational plans. They will choose schools because of a complex of factors: for example, the social acceptability of the school's name, their social ties to other choosing families, the reputation of the neighborhood, transportation processes, their emotional reaction to staff who represent the school, and—once the school is established—the experiences of relatives' and neighbors' children with all aspects of the school. Wise planners

will take these processes into account in planning; they will try to construct schools which will provide students with good interracial and interclass social experiences as well as good cognitive education. They will also try to plan magnet schools which will, individually and collectively, serve the needs of the diverse children of the community, including those whose families have less power and whose own academic accomplishments are modest.

It is likewise important for planners to remember that current public school children need to be prepared for a society which will be multiracial in almost all its aspects, as both current "majority" and "minority" students will live their adult lives among peers nearly evenly divided among white and non-white citizens. Desegregated schools must move toward social integration so that intergroup relations are based on mutual understanding and respect. Interpersonal friendships across racial lines must become commonplace both for the good of individuals and as a cement for intergroup relations. The social ambience of desegregated schools thus provides a crucial portion of the education they provide, especially in communities where housing and other aspects of adult and family social life are racially segregated.

Finally, central office planners need to develop sensitivity to the implications of magnet school planning for the working lives of the school building staffs who must carry out the plans. Where magnet school plans are developed by, or with substantial participation by, school level staffs, those persons will feel ownership in the plans and find most of the alterations of traditional or accustomed patterns empowering. But where magnet schools staffs have innovative approaches imposed upon them, they are likely to experience even imaginative plans as disenfranchisement and a revocation of informal professional autonomy. Planners

need to provide support for both administrators and teachers in these situations and to allow them some opportunities to shape the program as local experience indicates best. Those who would like to shape the plan to revert to traditional patterns need opportunities to move to congenial traditional schools without loss of face or reputation; so that others more sympathetic to the special program can replace them.

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